

Rooted Pedagogies: Black Women Activist Teachers Planting Seeds

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Abstract

The history of activism on the part of African American women has laid the foundation on which contemporary African American women activists and scholars have developed theories, critiques, and cultural frameworks that challenges pre- established paradigms and epistemologies. This paper focuses on extending the research that begun on African American teacher activists to gain sufficient insight into their political perspectives and how their perspectives were manifested in their personal and professional lives to influence their role as a teacher. This study was informed by black feminist epistemology and it employs portraiture as its research methodology. Data analysis yielded significant findings. The subjects of the study considered those life experiences to be most significant that contributed in developing their critical consciousness as children through the influence of their family, school, and community. Each teacher pointed to the need to teach critical thinking skills so that students of color will be able to establish their places in the world as productive citizens. The pedagogical approaches of the black women activist teachers were theorized and it emerged as a model of Rooted Pedagogies grounded in the historical tradition of black women's activism. Furthermore, the implications for teacher education and practice were discussed, alongside with the recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Teachers, Rooted Pedagogies, Activist, Black woman, African American

INTRODUCTION

About four decades ago, Dr. Bettye Collier-Thomas (1982) in an article entitled "*The impact of black women in education: Historical overview*," posed several questions regarding black women's contributions to the field of education. Among these questions are: "Is there any evidence that black female educators developed a philosophy of education which was

distinctive from that of black males, white females, and white males?” Since then, responses to this and similar questions have been varied but framed for the most part within accounts of black women’s struggles against oppression, social and economic discrimination, and unequal educational opportunities. Recent studies of black women teachers have provided perspectives that, while different, are interrelated. Findings from these studies highlight the cultural and political knowledge, dispositions, and commitments that black women brought to teaching, along with their sense of mission and ethical visions.

Accounts of the struggles on the part of African Americans to gain access to equal and quality education in the United States are part of the historical record (Clemmons, 2014; Dixson, 2003; Gordon, 1995). These struggles were linked to the survival of the Black community and to the black race as a whole. In the shadows of these struggles were Black women whose commitment to the educational advancement of Black people became a way of life. Although the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s eventually brought an end to the de facto segregation of schools and the so-called “separate but equal” doctrine of education, a racial gap in the achievement of black versus white students remains a reality to this day. In a climate of demographic changes that have fostered the resegregation of public schools (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016), black women teachers have continued to struggle in order to ensure that black students receives quality education that will help them succeed in life.

However, these changes have been accompanied by new struggles among which include how to best address the needs of diverse student populations, as well as how to eradicate contradictions that were not addressed by integration and that still contribute to the low achievement of black students and other students of color. Studies focusing on black women teachers have highlighted the use of voice as a metaphor for black women’s empowerment (Dixson & Dingus, 2008). Black women teachers represent a marginalized group whose voices, until recent years, remained absent from educational discourse. The United States, being a multicultural society, consists of black families that reflect a blending of cultures from different parts of the African Diaspora. Since the population of black students also reflects this diversity, there is a need to trace the teaching philosophy of black women teachers as it emerged over time.

This study was designed to explore the perspectives of black women activist teachers who, as veteran teachers, have honed their craft within the neighborhoods and schools of their own urban communities for more than few decades. It provides a view of a black feminist pedagogy that is homegrown, emanating from their material realities (Joseph, 1995). The purpose of this study was to extend the research that begun on African American women

activist teachers to include an examination of how their teaching philosophies were influenced by the existing socio-political environment and their cultural and historical legacies.

The overarching research question that drives this study was: In what ways has the life experiences of African American activist teachers informed how they define and carry out their roles as educators, given current educational disparities? Other more specific questions include:

(i) In relations to their own schooling, family and community lives, what life experiences do black women veteran activist teachers consider most significant? (ii) What issues and pedagogies do the teachers believe to be essential to the success of their students? How has their work as activists influenced their work with students in the classroom?

Following the footsteps of black women activist who, historically, used the activist potential of education to foster community development and institutional transformation, black women teachers have taken on many roles that have placed them on the front lines of political battles for social justice and human rights (Collins, 2000; Dixson, 2003).

The rationale for this study is, therefore, two-fold. First, this study contributes to our understanding of how the activism of black women teachers informs their pedagogy and how that pedagogy, which is black feminist in nature, acts as a change agent in and outside of the classroom (Joseph, 1995). Secondly, “Feminist researchers emphasize the synergy and interlinkages between epistemology, methodology, and method and are interested in the different ways that a researcher’s perspective on reality interacts with, and influences, how she goes about collecting and analyzing her data” (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to illuminate the lives and voices of the African American women activist teachers selected as the subjects of this study, portraiture was used as the methodology. Portraiture made its debut with Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1983) publication of *The Good High School*. She views portraiture as a way of reflecting its cross between art and science, its blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor, and its humanistic and literary metaphors. Portraiture blends aesthetics and empiricism while drawing on features of narrative, case study, phenomenology, and ethnography. The portraits stand as individual vignettes revealing recognizable themes and enabling patterns of experience to emerge from each topic being studied. According to Cope, Jones, and Hendricks (2015), each portrait requires the researcher to constantly reflect on the participant's experiences by incorporating ethnographic observations, interview responses, impressionistic records, the interpretation of context, and the researcher's experiences and

insights. It is a methodology that concentrates on success and positivity to immerse the reader in carefully painted and perceptive stories of success and positivity in times of adversity.

In the present study, portraiture was used as a methodology in order to explore the participants' life experiences and the synergistic nature of their roles as activists. In particular, the author sought to explore the aspects of subjects' teaching experiences that have been influenced by their roles as activists. This methodology was used with the intention of providing ample space to expose the complexities of the participants' lives and voices while minimizing the possibility of distortion and further marginalization. Portraiture provided the author with the framework that is most appropriate for listening to and examining their voices. Also, the use of portraiture as a method of inquiry in this study, not only allows for the incorporation of the author's voice, perspective and experience, but it also aids in establishing this study as a model for understanding black women activist teachers beyond the scope of their stories. Portraiture assists in capturing their essence - that is, the quality of their characters, the complexities of their life stories, and their reflections of history.

Participants and Criteria for their Selection

The participants in this study were selected purposefully. However, the goal here is to obtain thick descriptions of their lived experiences as teachers and activists. To start with, the author compiled a list of women known to have had connections to one or more of the Brooklyn, New York Family schools, a network of independent African-centered schools that developed out of the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent black Student Movement. The three veteran African American women teacher activists were chosen as the subjects of this study. Consequently, effort was made to represent a homogeneous sampling of teachers who shared the following common characteristics: (i) black women born into working class families and raised in a large urban center during the 1950s and 60's; (ii) Veteran teachers who have taught grades K-12 during the years ranging from 1975 to the present; and (iii) black women who have a history of engaging in social/political activism.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, open-ended questions were developed to gather details of the participants' experiences. The author conducted informal interviews in order to gain sufficient insight into the participants' political perspectives and how their perspectives were manifested in their personal and professional lives. The interviews were held a minimum of four times during a four-month period with the initial interview lasting 1-2 hours. All interviews were recorded using audio-tape and field notes were also taken. The

participants were provided an opportunity to view the transcripts of their interview. The related artifacts were collected, and these included photographs, poems as well as other historical data in the form of newspaper articles and history texts. Additionally, the author also maintained her own research journal in order to capture observations and personal reflections throughout the process. Finally, the data obtained was summarized with names of the participants, and the institutions with which they were affiliated was kept confidential.

Data Analysis

The author organized a plan for identifying, contrasting, and constructing the emergent themes from the data that had been transcribed. After placing sections of the data into the appropriate theme categories, a list of metaphors associated with one or more themes were identified. The interview data was triangulated with observation data that resulted from the collection of various documents from each participant.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Emergent Themes: This section presents the portraits of three black women teachers, framed within the themes that emerged from our conversations. The portraits of these women were very strong and challenging. Their collective life experiences echo an epistemology that is grounded in the African American community's historical and cultural tradition. Henry (1992) found it important to highlight the life experiences of these black women teachers, coupled with their race, class, and gender consciousness in order to demonstrate how their particular understandings, choices, and strategies were used and shaped in educating children of color. Cozart and Price (2005) pointed out that:

...the cultural orientation makes a difference in the way one critiques society' has significant meaning when one questions how black women's cultural orientations dictate how they come to understand their relationship to education, and how their understanding of the role of schooling shapes their identities.

The first research question posed for the present study sought to identify what the teachers considered as significant life experiences that are related to their own schooling, family life, community and community lives. The experiences considered most significant were those that contributed to the development of critical consciousnesses on the part of each teacher. These experiences also provided the impetus for their eventual social and political activism. The philosophical, ideological, cultural, spiritual, and practical approaches of all three teachers represent an extension of the black women's activist tradition. Also, their collective focus on black survival and preparing

their youth to be productive citizens of the world is reflective of the endeavors of those black women educators that were part of a vanguard of black women activists who, in the face of racial, economic and social oppression, built institutions of learning and assisted their people in gaining access to education.

The second research question looked at the issues and pedagogies that the teachers believed to be essential to the success of their students. Each singled out the need to teach critical thinking skills, as well as the social skills necessary for students to be able to maneuver successfully in the world as productive citizens. The subjects of this study provided exemplars for fostering student achievement through the teaching of critical thinking skills. This also relates to their goal of preparing students to be able to effectively deal with social justice issues. These teachers linked critical thinking to solve problems for survival, as well as to the ability to take on leadership roles in preparation for society's future demands to bring the needed social change.

Furthermore, they emphasized their global identities as people of African descent and voiced their connection to African people throughout the African Diaspora. As their parents did when they were growing up, the teachers seek to motivate their students towards achievement through enhancing their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. They do so by establishing an African-centered family-like environment in their classrooms.

From the theoretical base of the findings and the emerging common themes, the author was able to visualize a unique model of pedagogy known as "Rooted Pedagogies." These are teacher practices, dispositions, and ways of knowing that emanate from the unique and combined aspects of black women's life experiences. This includes black women's philosophy, as well as their historical legacy of activism. Rooted Pedagogies guides the connections among black feminist pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching, and also incorporate their focus on cultural competence and cultural knowledge, on critical thinking and critical consciousness, on self-reflection and self-actualization, as well as on academic achievement, success, and empowerment. Using the metaphor of a tree planted, taking root and growing to maturity, the rooted pedagogies are comprised of the following components:

1. *The Planting of the Seeds:* Rooted pedagogies are grounded in the family, school, and community experiences of childhood. They consist of experiences shaped by the social and historical context of the period, the traditions and survival lessons taught and learned, as well as the behaviors modeled and practiced. This stage represents the planting of the seeds of critical consciousness that shape the spirit of activism.

2. *Watering /Fertilizing:* Rooted pedagogies represent the extension of black women's activist tradition of struggle for group survival and institutional

transformation.

3. *Planting Roots:* Rooted pedagogies reflect the use of education as a vehicle for the advancement and the survival of the black race. These are the approaches of teaching that reflect a specific way of life and that aim toward providing children with the necessary knowledge and skills to understand and survive in the world as productive citizens.

Therefore, this pedagogical model reflects the synergistic nature of black women activist teachers' life experiences. That is, the totality of experiences that these teachers bring to the teaching profession. It also includes those intangible and un-theorized aspects of black women's understandings, which might explain why "We just do what we have to do," without naming it. As seen with the teachers in this study, Rooted Pedagogies extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom and school to incorporate students' families and other institutions within their community environment.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The subjects of this study demonstrated a strong understanding of their identities as people of African descent. They incorporated African-centered values and teaching strategies that build directly on the practices of culturally relevant pedagogy. This highlights that it is important to link multicultural education with global education. Banks (2009) also suggests that there is need for students to begin to view issues and concepts globally so that they can develop a cosmopolitan perspective. In order to foster this, the perspective of teachers must demonstrate an understanding of the relationship among cultural, national, and global identification. Thus, the schools of education can aid in the effort to link global education and multicultural education by developing courses that explore the global cultures and subcultures that exist within diverse communities in the United States.

The findings of this study also suggest the development of curricula within teacher education that may prepare the teachers to do activist work. Activist work in the classroom involves teaching students to think critically (Hooks, 2010). By engaging students in learning activities that promote such critical thinking skills as problem-solving, identifying contradictions, gathering information and evaluating, pre-service teachers will come to understand the dialectical process of critical consciousness-raising, that would help bring the social change.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study suggest several possible directions for future research and practice in teacher education. Changes in the United States population in terms of race ethnicity, social class, and other differences have helped to shape the educational experiences of all students in our schools

(Nieto, 2005). The changing demographics in this country are also reflected in teachers that are found in public schools. More research may be conducted that focuses on the cultural diversity among black teachers. Further research that compares the perspectives of African American activist teachers and activist teachers of Latin American descent regarding their roles as teachers would serve to link multicultural education and global education while also contributing to the literature on teacher activism.

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